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Writer in Soviet Union Dares to Leave Beaten Path

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KIEV, U. S. S. R., March 22,—Victor Nekrasov at 58 is one of the small vanguard of middle generation postwar soviet writers who has dared to depart from the stultifying tales about heroic builders of communism long required of them.

He is one of three or four who have devoted themselves to examination or real human difficulties, be the stories optimistic or not, and who for their effort have suffered varying degrees of personal hardship and official criticism over a period of more than 20 years.

They are a group highly popular at home whose occasional appearance in the liberal literary journal Novy Mir is an event of major importance, sometimes taken as a sign of which way the political wind is blowing.

Thus I was somewhat surprised when a knock at the door of my small room in Kiev's chief hotel for foreigners turned out to be his.

Agrees to Meeting

On the telephone he had readily agreed to meet us—two western correspondents on a short visit to his home town, the Ukrainian capital, tho our visit came at a time when official efforts to resist all "foreign influence" are being strengthened.

Apologizing because he could not invite us to his apartment for supper because his 90-year-old mother with whom he lives is ill, he readily agreed to join us for supper in our hotel.

A slight man with wavy black hair graying in front and a thin black moustache also graying, he appeared in a wrinkled brown sport coat, plaid sport shirt open at the collar, and a jaunty cloth cap.

Everything bespoke a casual, even lighthearted manner tho his gaze was deep, penetrating, suggesting a habit of thoro observation, and his hands betrayed a slight but constant tremor.

Every Bit a Veteran

In appearance and manner he was every bit the sensitive war veteran whose experiences as a soviet army officer in the worst fighting at Stalingrad had produced his first bo[illegible] the Trenches of Stalingrad," which sold a million and a half copies

It was a meandering tale, full of human uncertainties but expressing a deeply felt warmth of patriotism and spirit of democracy. But it was also the work of a man who even in the moment of miraculous victory could not forget the mistakes of military leaders.

He was also the hardened soldier whose tale, variously translated as "Home Town" or "In One's Native Town," described perhaps autobiographically the difficulties of readjustment for a war veteran returning home, who learns thru a talkative boy that his wife is living with "Uncle Fedya," and who violently resists those who for personal advancement question the loyalty of colleagues who lived for a time under German occupation.

Apparently at his ease, Nekrasov began by asking, "What about a half liter?"

"Of what?" asked my Italian companion.

Food With Drink

"What else—Vodka!" came the answer. And with that he ordered, in typical Russian style, a variety of the cold appetizers eaten with vodka—herring, smoked salmon, roast pork, and piles of bread.

After the initial traditional toast, he began:

"Chekhov said, 'How pleasant it is to be inside on a cold night with friends, to have a little glass of vodka and then immediately have a second.'"

"What about you?" I asked. "When did you start writing?"

"From childhood—when I was eight."

"I mean fiction."

"Yes, yes, so do I. At eight I wrote a play. Very carefully in big block letters, I arranged my cast of characters . . . but then I was an architect," he continued.

An Unusual Childhood

It had been an unusual childhood. His father was a painter who had traveled much, even to Tahiti, and eventually settled as a bookkeeper for Alfred Nobel who, in addition to developing explosives and founding the peace prize, amassed a huge fortune exploiting the Baku oilfields in southern Russia. Nekrasov's mother is a Swiss with Italian ancestors.

[illegible] in Kiev, young Victor spent his earliest [illegible] in Paris speaking French and only learned Russian upon returning with his parents to his native city.

In Kiev he graduated from the architectural institute but felt more attraction to the theater and started working with a small troupe which produced a number of important plays tho it had only four actors.

"I was one of the last rejects of Stanislavsky," he joked. In the late 30s his ambition brought him to Moscow to audition in the famous Moscow Art theater founded by Konstantin Stanislavsky.

"He told me I was good but that he had no opening and he would call me when there was one."

Goes to Front As Officer

Convinced that the answer was more diplomatic than truthful he returned to Kiev and joined a traveling troupe carrying theater thruout the vast Soviet Union as far as Vladivostok on the Pacific coast.

"In the meantime Stanislavsky died [1938] and then came the war.'

Nekrasov went to the front as an officer of engineers, survived the holocaust of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43, was later wounded and returned to Kiev to recover.

"In the Trenches of Stalingrad" was written in 1945 and published the next year starting his literary career with his first taste of official criticism. Izvestia described the novel as merely the testimony of a participant in the battle who did not understand the war as a whole.

Much Criticism Later

Since then there has been much criticism, much of it public, all official. The most recent, tho indirect, came in the January issue of the Orthodox literary journal October which criticized a newly issued literary encyclopedia for not being critical enough in its description of Negrasov.

In 1963, as Khrushchev began retrenching his early hesitant steps toward some permissiveness Nekrasov had been threatened with explusion from the Communist party largely for a collection of essays on his trip to the United States, "On Both Sides of the Ocean."

"I voted in Chicago," he laughed. "Voted for John Kennedy." Being there during the 1960 campaign the Russian visitors had been shown a voting booth and machine, each being given an opportunity to try it.

"What about soviet literature today?" my companion asked.

"Solzhenitsyn, Solzhenitsyn, Solzhenitsyn," he replied, "Solzhenitsyn is soviet literature today."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is the one soviet writer currently suffering the stiffest official censure. He burst onto the literary scene in 1962 with his "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" allegedly published with the personal sponsorship of Khrushchev and describing life in a concentration camp.

Since then his novels "The First Circle" and "Cancer Ward" have not been published here but in the west, much to the displeasure of the Kremlin and its literary control arm, the writers' union.

Beginning of Dissent

The decision apparently by top leaders a year ago not to publish "Cancer Ward" in Novy Mir after it had been scheduled signaled the beginning of the current period of official resistance to nonorthodox thought.

With that, Solzhenitsyn was bitterly attacked in the official organ of the writers' union, accused of "dedicating his talents . . . to the malignant enemies of his homeland," and thus plunged into an effective official isolation.

The paper added that "whether he finds a way out of this impasse depends on Solzhenitsyn himself."

"I see him occasionally," Negrasov said. "He works constantly—12 hours a day, lives a solitary life in Ryazan [100 miles from Moscow] and never wants to see anybody, especially journlists. He is an honest, decent man."

Usually Appears Late

We asked about Alexander Tvardovsky, the poet and editor of Novy Mir. This journal, under nearly constant orthodox fire, usually appears late and is sold out immediately for it has in the last several years published first the leading works of Russia's most popu[illegible]

"Without Tvardovsky," Nekrasov answered, "there would be no soviet literature."